Jim Henson's™

THE STORYTELLER™

Shapeshifters

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The Children of Lir

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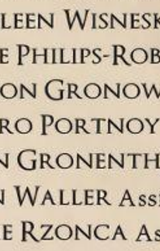

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TALE ONE VARIANT COVER

Mateus Manhanini

The Children of Lir

"The Children of Lir" (or *Oidheadh Chlainne Li*r, as it's known in Irish) is an ancient story which, like so many others, has its origins shrouded in mystery. It is assumed to have been crafted in the 14th century, in the post-Christianization period of Ireland. Likely designed as a story to blend the ancient Gaelic culture with that of the Christian religion, it incorporates the characters of the old mythology with the message of faith bringing freedom from suffering.

Whatever the case may be, it's clear that "The Children of Lir" is a story with an ulterior motive. It's not transparent, and what you think may constitute the best solution or the ultimate reward isn't necessarily the outcome of the narrative. Our fate is hidden from us... up until the moment it is not.

That can even be said for the author of the version you're about to read.

See, I went into this project expecting it to be a great feather in my cap. An opportunity to spread my wings and soar among so many of the other great storytellers that have come before me in previous anthologies. Little did I realize that in the end, what I coveted the most from this opportunity wasn't fame and glory, it was a better understanding of why I do what I do.

Storytelling is a "gifting" trade. It's not something solely meant for the betterment of those who wield the skill of narration; its success comes from applying that skill towards the betterment of others, by entertaining and educating them on something they didn't know before. It's a selfless profession with the greatest of rewards — that through the telling, everyone gains something.

"The Children of Lir" reminded me of that, which makes it a fantastic legend that still has some staying power. It reminded me that I became and thrived as a storyteller through sharing the experience — the "fame and the glory" — among both family and strangers alike.

In that way, we can all fly together.

Dedicated to the memory of my own faithful storyteller dog, Archie. Never a kinder or gentler dog-o could I have asked for.

Andre R. Frattino

MY! WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU HAVE IN YOUR MOUTH?

MMPH, MMPH ERMMPH!

I BEG YOUR PARDON?

PTOOY!

I SAID, IT'S A JOURNAL. FOR YOU.

A JOURNAL? WHATEVER FOR?

FOR YOUR STORIES, OF COURSE!

I FIGURED, WITH AS MANY STORIES AS YOU KNOW, YOU COULD WRITE THEM ALL DOWN AND BECOME FAMOUS!

POPPYCOCK! I'M NOT INTERESTED IN FAME AND FORTUNE! THAT'S **NOT** WHY I TELL THE STORIES.

HRRMPH?

THEN WHY **DO** YOU TELL THEM?

TO ANSWER THAT, I'LL HAVE TO TELL YOU A TALE...

THE **TUATHA DÉ DANANN** WERE A CLAN OF SUPERNATURAL BEINGS WHO EXISTED ON THE SHORES OF IRELAND.

SO ENLIGHTENED WERE THEY, THAT ALL THEY TOUCHED SHINED WITH AN ETHEREAL GLOW.

THE TUATHA DÉ DANANN WERE LED BY **LORD LIR,** WHOSE FOUR CHILDREN POSSESSED A TENACITY THAT STRENGTHENED SPIRITS ACROSS THE LAND.

FIONNA WAS THE FIERCEST OF THE CHILDREN. BORN WITH A WARRIOR'S HEART, HER BLADE WAS NEARLY AS SHARP AS HER TONGUE.

AODH, THE PEACEMAKER. ALWAYS SEEKING THE PATH DEVOID OF CONFLICT...WHICH OFTEN PUT HIM AT ODDS WITH HIS BIG SISTER.

AND THE TWINS, **FIACHRA AND CONN,** KNOWN FOR THEIR RAMBUNCTIOUS SPIRITS AND KNACK FOR FINDING TROUBLE.

USUALLY, THE CHILDREN SANG GREAT SONGS TO BOLSTER THE SPIRITS OF THE TUATHA DÉ DANANN...

BUT WITH THE SUDDEN DEATH OF THEIR MOTHER, THE CHILDREN'S VOICES TURNED SORROWFUL, TOUCHING THE HEARTS OF ALL WHO MOURNED THEIR LOSS.

WELL...NOT **ALL.**

LORD LIR ALLOWED HIMSELF NO TIME TO GRIEVE THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE, NOR TO RELIEVE THE LAMENT OF HIS CHILDREN.

ONLY THE LONGEVITY OF HIS **FAME** WAS WORTHY OF HIS ATTENTION.

THE OTHER UNWAVERING SOUL BELONGED TO THE CHILDREN'S UNCLE, **DAIN.**

PREOCCUPIED WITH THE COMING CONQUESTS, LIR APPOINTED DAIN RULER BY PROXY.

IT DIDN'T TAKE DAIN LONG TO BECOME CONSUMED WITH HIS NEW POSITION--HE **GORGED** HIMSELF ON IT, ROOTING FOR EVERY MORSEL OF CONTROL.

HE HAD BECOME SEDENTARY IN HIS WAYS, AND FEARED THE CHILDREN WOULD ONE DAY **UNSEAT** HIM FROM HIS POSITION.

SO HE CONCOCTED A SOLUTION. YOU SEE, DAIN WAS LIR'S HALF-BROTHER. HIS MOTHER WAS THE INFAMOUS CELTIC WITCH **CARMAN** AND SHE--

SLOW DOWN! SLOW DOWN! I'M TRYING TO WRITE THIS ALL AS YOU GO!

HMMPH. WHAT I WOULDN'T GIVE FOR SOME FINGERS AND A THUMB!

AHEM! AS I WAS SAYING...CARMAN HAD TAUGHT HER SON THE WAYS OF DARK MAGIC.

BUT HE CONCEALED HIS POWERS FROM LORD LIR, WHO HAD DECLARED THE USE OF **MAGIC** PUNISHABLE BY DEATH.

DEATH WAS NOT ON DAIN'S AGENDA, AND SO...

M'LORD, MAY I HAVE A WORD?

MAKE IT A QUICK WORD, DAIN. I HAVEN'T ALL DAY TO PRATTLE. THERE ARE LANDS TO WIN AND STORIES OF MY GREATNESS TO BE WRITTEN!

THAT'S RIGHT! WE HAVE A LEGACY TO SECURE!

FIONNA HAD ALWAYS TAKEN AFTER HER FATHER'S WARRIOR WAYS, BUT WITH THE LOSS OF HER MOTHER...

...SHE BECAME EVEN MORE OBSESSED WITH HER FATHER'S MISSION.

OF COURSE. IT'S JUST THAT, WITH THE RECENT **SAD TIDINGS,** I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A NICE CHANGE OF PACE FOR THE CHILDREN IF I TOOK THEM FOR A RIDE THROUGH THE COUNTRY.

THEY LOOK AS IF THEY COULD USE THE DISTRACTION...

SORRY, AODH, BUT I'M AFRAID THIS TABLE IS FOR ADULTS AND WARRIORS **ONLY.**

IT'S NO PLACE FOR CHILDREN.

YOU'RE ONLY A YEAR OLDER THAN ME, FIONNA!

WHICH MEANS YOU'RE TOO YOUNG TO BE A **REAL** WARRIOR!

MORE OF A WARRIOR THAN ***YOU*** ARE, WITH THOSE FEEBLE ARMS!

YOU'RE NASTY! NO WONDER NONE OF THE OTHER CHILDREN WANTS TO PLAY WITH YOU!

I HAVE NO INTEREST IN THEIR ***CHILDISH*** GAMES!

NO, YOU'RE TOO BUSY PLAYING WITH YOUR DUMB ***DOLLS!***

THESE ARE ***FIGURINES*** AND THEY ARE NOT DUMB!

THEY'RE NOT DUMB. ***YOU ARE!***

ENOUGH!

DAIN, I COULDN'T AGREE MORE. TAKE THE CHILDREN TO... WHATEVER IT WAS YOU HAD PLANNED FOR THEM...

...INCLUDING FIONNA.

WHAT?!

NOW, WHERE WERE WE BEFORE ALL THAT NONSENSE?

COME ALONG, CHILDREN.

BUT... BUT...

*AND SO DAIN TOOK THE CHILDREN FROM THEIR HOME--ACROSS THE HILLS, THROUGH THE WOODS, AND OVER THE BABBLING BROOKS. FAR, **FAR** AWAY...*

WHERE THEIR END WOULD NOT BE HEARD BY A SINGLE SOUL.

IT'S BEEN A LONG RIDE. WHY DON'T WE REST BY THIS LAKE? TAKE A FEW MOMENTS TO FRESHEN UP BEFORE THE RIDE HOME?

WE DON'T WANT TO RETURN WITH OUR ***FEATHERS*** ALL RUFFLED, DO WE? *Heh heh.*

I DON'T TRUST UNCLE DAIN. HE'S UP TO SOMETHING.

YOU'VE BEEN SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME WITH FATHER.

MEANING?

YOU THINK EVERYONE IS JUST LIKE THOSE STUPID *"FIGURINES"* ON THE TABLE...AN ***ENEMY.*** YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING THAT'S NOT THE KEY TO YOUR *"GREATNESS."*

THERE'S NO CRIME IN SEEKING TO BETTER ONESELF.

YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS, AODH.

JEALOUS? OF WHAT?

THAT FATHER CHOOSES TO SPEND HIS TIME WITH ***ME*** AND NOT YOU.

IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK IS GOING ON?

OUR FATHER SPENDS HIS TIME ON ONLY ONE THING, AND IT'S NOT PLAYING WITH--

AAIIEEEE!

THE TWINS!

FIACHRA?! CONN?!

IT'S **DARK MAGIC!** SOME CURSE HAS GOTTEN A HOLD OF THEM FROM THE WATER!

A CURSE? B-BUT FROM WHO?

WHO ELSE?

HA! SO END THE CHILDREN OF LIR!

GOING OUT OF THIS LIFE THE WAY THEY LIVED IT... **BICKERING!**

I ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE A SLIMY, NO-GOOD, **GLUTTON** FOR THE CROWN!

WHY NOT DO AWAY WITH THESE MAGIC TRICKS AND TAKE ME ON **STEEL-TO-STEEL,** UNCLE?

BECAUSE, MY DEAR NIECE, NOT ALL OF US ARE AS ***CANNY*** WITH A BLADE AS YOU ARE. SOME OF US PREFER TO STRIKE FROM A DISTANCE. IT'S NOT ONLY SAFER...IT'S SMARTER.

IT'S ***UNFAIR*** IS WHAT IT IS! AND YOU'RE A DIRTY CHEAT!

A ***CHEAT,*** YOU SAY? NAY, SWEET FIONNA! I AM FAR FROM A CHEAT.

IN FACT, I FOLLOW THE RULES OF CURSES MOST STRICTLY. YOU SEE, NO CURSE CAN BE SET WITHOUT A CHANCE FOR IT TO BE BROKEN...

LISTEN TO THESE WORDS CLOSELY.

THE CHILDREN OF LIR MUST SET INTO MOTION THE ***SONG OF A FOREIGN LAND,*** PLAYED BY A ***SAINTLY VISITOR...***

TOGETHER, THIS MUST BE ACHIEVED. ONLY THEN, THEIR TRUE FORMS SHALL THE CURSE RESTORE!

UNTIL THAT TIME COMES TO PASS--IF IT EVER DOES--ENJOY YOUR LIVES...

WOOOSH

...AS THE DAINTY AND ***FRAGILE*** LITTLE BIRDS THAT YOU ARE!

SWANS? HE TURNED THEM INTO SWANS?!

Huh. OF ALL THE THINGS TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO!

IRONIC, REALLY...

SWANS MAY LOOK DELICATE AND DEMURE...

...BUT THEY HAVE SHARP TONGUES FILLED WITH EVEN SHARPER TEETH!

WITH THE CURSE SET, DAIN ABANDONED THE CHILDREN TO STRUGGLE IN THEIR NEW AND NON-HUMAN FORMS.

FORTUNATELY, FIONNA'S DRIVE FOR REVENGE WAS GREAT.

SHE WAS A FAST LEARNER, AND AN EVEN FASTER TEACHER...

FINALLY!

GRR-RAK

IF IT TOOK YOU THREE ANY ***LONGER*** TO LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR WINGS, UNCLE DAIN WOULD HAVE BEATEN US HOME!

QUICK. WE MUST WARN FATHER!

FATHER? AS SOON AS HE SETS EYES ON US, HE'LL ROAST US OVER A SPIT! YOU KNOW HOW FOND HE IS OF ***FOWL.***

NO, I AIM TO ARM MYSELF AND BRING THE BATTLE TO DAIN DIRECTLY!

FIONNA, THE TWINS ARE ***FRIGHTENED!*** WE MUST AT LEAST TRY TO GET OUR FATHER'S ATTENTION.

PERHAPS IF HE HEARS OUR VOICES BEFORE SEEING OUR FACES, HE'LL THINK BEFORE HE STRIKES.

FINE...

LET US CALL OUT TO OUR FATHER THROUGH SONG. IF HE COMES, WE'LL KNOW WE ARE SAVED.

"IF NOT, THEN WE ARE ON OUR OWN..."

THE SWANS SANG OUT TO LORD LIR...

STRONGER AND MORE PASSIONATELY THAN EVER.

YET THE CHILDREN'S VOICES FELL ON DEAF EARS, AS FAR AS LORD LIR WAS CONCERNED.

WHAT A RACKET! CAN'T ANYONE UNDERSTAND I'M TRYING TO SECURE MY LEGACY?

THEY SANG AND THEY SANG, LONG AFTER NIGHT FELL. AND WHEN IT WAS OBVIOUS THEIR FATHER WOULD NOT ANSWER THEM, AODH ASKED THE QUESTION...

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

WE CAN'T STAY HERE. DAIN WILL HAVE OUR NECKS.

WE'LL TAKE FLIGHT, AND SEE IF WE CAN'T FIND A SOLUTION TO OUR CURSE ON OUR OWN.

FIONNA LED HER BROTHERS ACROSS THE NIGHT, AWAY FROM THEIR HOME AND ON TOWARD AN UNCERTAIN DESTINY.

FROM HERE, THE CHILDREN OF LIR COULD ONLY DEPEND ON ONE THING...

...THEMSELVES.

THE CHILDREN FLEW FOR WHAT FELT LIKE FOREVER AND A DAY...

...UNTIL THEIR SITUATION BEGAN TO TAKE ITS TOLL.

FLYING IS HARD WORK!

THERE, THERE, WE'LL FIND SOME FOOD SOON, I PROMISE.

GRUMBLE!

GRRRRR!

AH-HA!

SWISH

DID YOU SEE THAT? WITH A LITTLE MORE PRACTICE, I'LL BE READY TO TAKE ON DAIN!

EVEN WITHOUT MY FINGERS AND THUMBS!

HOW WONDERFUL FOR YOU.

PERHAPS YOU COULD FIRST PUT YOUR NEW SKILLS TO A DIFFERENT USE?

SUCH AS HELPING US FIND A WAY TO FILL OUR BELLIES? WE'RE *STARVING!*

FIONNA'S DRIVE FOR REVENGE WAS GREAT...

BUT SHE COULDN'T ALLOW HER SIBLINGS TO STARVE.

SO, WITH HER SWORD PLANTED FIRMLY IN HER BEAK, SHE SET OFF IN SEARCH OF FOOD.

AH! THHSSH WILTH DOOO NISHELY!

SWISH

CRK CRAK CRK

FOR YEARS THE CHILDREN ENJOYED THEIR LIFE ON THE SOUTHERN MEADOWS, LEARNING THE WAYS OF SWANS AND FEASTING ON FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.

UNTIL FIONNA GREW RESTLESS IN HER SWORD TRAINING AND DESIRED TO SET OFF, IN THE HOPES OF **SHARPENING** HER SKILLS ELSEWHERE...

AND PERHAPS EVEN FINDING A **"SAINTLY VISITOR"** ALONG THE WAY.

THE SWANS TRAVELED FAR, FAR NORTH, WHERE THE LANDS WERE LESS HOSPITABLE, AND THE POPULATION OF SAINTLY VISITORS EVEN LESS PLENTIFUL.

BRRRR!

AS WINTER SET IN, AND THE SNOW FELL, THE SWANS' TROUBLES BECAME CHILLINGLY MORE APPARENT.

HMM. YES...YES, I THINK THAT'LL DO IT.

THAT'LL DO NICELY. AN EXCELLENT PLAN.

F-F-FIONNA? H-HELP US!

OUR F-F-FEET ARE F-F-FROZEN TO THE GROUND!

FIONNA'S DRIVE FOR REVENGE WAS GREAT...

BUT SHE COULDN'T ALLOW HER SIBLINGS TO FREEZE.

THERE, THAT SHOULD DO IT.

THWOOSH

BETTER?

BETTER.

TIME WENT ON, AND AGAIN FIONNA'S VENGEFUL SPIRIT TOOK FLIGHT.

BUT NO SALVATION MATERIALIZED FOR THEM ON THOSE CRAGGY AND TUMULTUOUS SHORES.

CURSE YOU, DAIN!

A THOUSAND YEARS OF SUFFERING THIS CURSE HAS NOT TEMPERED MY SPIRIT! I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE, AND MY LEGACY RESTORED!

F-FIONNA! WE CAN'T SEE YOU IN THE STORM!

COME BACK!

THE WAVES ARE--

SPLASH!

AODH?!

FIONNA'S DRIVE FOR REVENGE WAS GREAT...

AODH?! CONN?! FIACHRA!

SO GREAT, THAT IT INEVITABLY COST HER MORE THAN SHE COULD AFFORD.

ALL THESE DECADES OF FIGHTING, AND FOR WHAT?

THE TUATHA DÉ DANANN WERE ONCE A GREAT PEOPLE, NOW WE'RE PRACTICALLY BEGGARS!

ALL FOR HIS ***FAME AND GLORY.***

FAT LOT IT'LL DO HIM NOW...

...WITH LIR DEAD AND BURIED, AND **LORD DAIN** ASSUMING THE THRONE!

ONLY FAME LIR'LL GET IS THE FAME OF BRINGING ABOUT THE DOWN-FALL OF OUR KINGDOM!

TO LORD LIR AND A THOUSAND YEARS OF MISERY!

HA!

IN THAT MOMENT, FIONNA REALIZED THAT HER FATHER'S SEARCH FOR FAME AND IMMORTAL REMEMBRANCE WAS A FOOL'S ERRAND...AND THAT SHE, TOO, WAS A LONELY, MISERABLE FOOL.

HER FATHER LOST HIS KINGDOM...

...AND SHE LOST HER FAMILY.

FIONNA DRIFTED AIMLESSLY, UNTIL SHE WASHED UP ON A SHORE NOT FAR FROM HER HOMELAND...

*BY THE FEET OF SOMEONE **MOST** UNEXPECTED.*

SQUEEZE

DRIP DRIP

HNNH?

WELCOME BACK TO THE WORLD OF THE LIVING, MY LITTLE FEATHERED FRIEND.

WH-WHERE AM I? WHO ARE YOU?

:GASP: IT SPEAKS!

AFTER MUCH BEWILDERMENT ON BOTH SIDES, FIONNA AND HER RESCUER SHARED THEIR STORIES OVER A WARM BOWL OF BROTH.

I TRAVELED HERE FROM THE CONTINENT, BUILT THIS CHAPEL, AND SET OUT TO SPREAD THE GOOD WORD...

YET ALL I'VE FOUND ARE TOPPLED BUILDINGS AND EMPTY STOMACHS. ***WAR*** AND ***RUIN*** SEEM TO BE ALL THAT'S LEFT FOR THE POOR SOULS OF THIS LAND.

I FEAR I MAY BE PARTLY TO BLAME FOR THAT...

A TALKING SWAN? RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WRETCHES OF THIS PLACE?

I FIND THAT HARD TO BELIEVE.

ALL THE SAME, I'D LIKE TO REPAY YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS.

I AM BUT A SIMPLE MONK, I HAVE NO NEED FOR COINS OR BAUBLES.

WHERE I COME FROM, OUR GREATEST GIFT IS IN SONG...

FIONNA, HAVING SO LITTLE LEFT TO GIVE, BEGAN TO SING THE SADDEST AND SWEETEST OF SONGS...

NOT ONLY FOR THE MONK, BUT FOR HER LOST LANDS, HER PEOPLE...AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, FOR HER **BROTHERS.**

HER VOICE CARRIED ACROSS THE LANDS, THROUGH THE MEADOWS, THE FORESTS, AND THE SHORES.

IT HAD BEEN SO LONG SINCE **ANY** OF THE CHILDREN OF LIR'S VOICES HAD BEEN HEARD, IT BEGAN TO BRIGHTEN SPIRITS ACROSS THE COUNTRY...

ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE CITY RUINS OF THE TUATHA DÉ DANANN, A SHADOW OF THEIR ONCE-PROSPEROUS AND OTHERWORLDLY GLORY...
TO THE ONCE-GREAT THRONE ROOM THAT THE CHILDREN OF LIR SANG IN A LIFETIME BEFORE...
INTO THE EARS OF THE FIEND RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR SAD, FOWL STATE.
Huh?!
TH-THAT VOICE... COULD IT BE?
AFTER ALL THIS TIME--THE CHILDREN OF LIR COULD BE CLOSE TO BREAKING THE CURSE!
AND IF I KNOW THAT WRETCHED FIONNA, SHE'LL COME LOOKING FOR ME!
WELL, I WON'T LET HER GET THAT CHANCE!
BZZZT
SQUEEEEEEEEEE

AS FIONNA FINISHED HER SONG, THE MONK FELT TRANSFORMED.

SPLENDID! SPLENDID! WHAT AN EXCELLENT GIFT.

THANK YOU. IF ONLY MY BROTHERS WERE STILL HERE--

RRUMBLE

DO-DO YOU HEAR THAT?!

IT SOUNDS LIKE... HOOVES?

KA-PLOW

DAIN TRANSFORMED HIMSELF INTO A BEAST REFLECTIVE OF HIS OWN INNER GREED AND CORRUPTION--A **MASSIVE BOAR,** WITH HUGE TUSKS...

...ALL THE SHARPER TO SKEWER AN UNSUSPECTING SWAN.

WELL, WELL, SWEET FIONNA. AT FIRST I WAS WORRIED YOU AND YOUR BROTHERS WERE ABOUT TO BECOME A PROBLEM FOR ME...

AND YET, I FIND YOU HERE.. ALL ALONE. NO BROTHERS IN SIGHT.

NOW, IF YOU'LL HOLD STILL, I'LL STAMP OUT WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR PATHETIC LIFE, AND--

PINK

OOOF! WHAT?

GET AWAY FROM OUR SISTER, YOU PIG!

OR FACE THE WRATH OF THE *CHILDREN OF LIR!*

THE CHILDREN OF LIR? TOGETHER? B-BUT HOW?!

SNIP

SNAP

WE'VE HAD A *LIFETIME* TO PUT ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES, THANKS TO YOU!

AS THE MONK CAME TO AND SAW THE LARGE BOAR DOING BATTLE WITH THE GAGGLE OF SWANS, HE WAS REMINDED OF HIS YOUTH ON THE CONTINENT...

HOW, WHEN HE AND HIS KIN WOULD HUNT WILD BOAR, THEY WERE OFTEN CORRALLED BY THE **BANGING** *AND* **CLATTERING** *OF DRUMS.*

THE MONK HAD NO DRUMS...

...BUT FORTUNATELY, HE HAD JUST PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON HIS CHAPEL A DAY EARLIER.

WITH ANY LUCK...

THE SONG OF HIS HOLY MISSION WOULD YIELD THE SAME RESULT...

GONG

GONG

GING

GONG

GING

AND PERHAPS MUCH MORE...

GAH! MY EARS!

FOR YOU SEE, THE BELLS CHIMED A FOREIGN TUNE...

HUZZAH! FINGERS AND THUMBS!

PLAYED BY A DEVOUT VISITOR...

SET IN MOTION BY THE CHILDREN OF LIR. **UNITED.**

AND I KNOW JUST WHAT TO DO WITH THEM!

SNATCH

SNAP

NOOOO! DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE, GIRL?! YOU'VE TRAPPED ME IN THIS FORM FOREVER!

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK FOR A ***WARRIOR*** SUCH AS MYSELF, DEAR SWEET UNCLE.

AND SPEAKING OF...

I MUST SAY THAT A THOUSAND YEARS OF IMPRISONMENT IN THE BODY OF A SWAN HAS REALLY WORKED UP AN ***APPETITE.***

EEK!

NOT LOOKING TO BE ANYONE'S MEAL, DAIN ESCAPED INTO THE NIGHT, NEVER TO BE SEEN AGAIN.

SQUEEEE SQUEEEE

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU CAME FOR ME!

I-I WAS SO LOST.

SO WERE WE--BUT ONCE WE HEARD YOUR SONG, WE HAD TO COME. FOR WORSE AND FOR BETTER, WE'RE FAMILY!

GLORIOUS! I'M CERTAIN WHAT HAS JUST TRANSPIRED WILL GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS THE GREATEST LEGEND OF THE LAND.

FIONNA, YOUR LEGACY IS ASSURED!

THANK YOU, BUT GLORY NO LONGER MATTERS TO ME...

ALL THAT MATTERS IS RIGHT HERE, IN MY HANDS.

WITH THE CURSE BROKEN, AND THEIR LIVES AT AN END, THE CHILDREN OF LIR LEFT THE REALM OF MEN BEHIND.

UP, UP, AND UP THEIR SOULS TRAVELED, TO SING SONGS FROM LOFTY NEW HEIGHTS ACROSS IRELAND...

WHICH, WITH THE DEFEAT OF DAIN, WOULD SEE A NEW ERA OF **PEACE** FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS TO COME.

SO NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

YES...

I MEAN, I THINK SO...

...NO, NOT REALLY.

WELL, IMMORTALITY AND FAME ARE ***FLEETING*** IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS.

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT IS SHARING OUR TALENTS WITH THE PEOPLE THAT MATTER TO US THE MOST...

...OUR FAMILY.

SLURP

WELL, YOU'LL ALWAYS BE FAMOUS IN MY BOOK!

AND THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME.

THE END.

TALE TWO VARIANT COVER

Mateus Manhanini

The Dancers

I was raised with Lipan Apache stories, in which animal people, legendary figures, and even humans can change their physical forms with ease. Once, a boy became a fish. Another time, Coyote (during one of his terrible schemes) disguised himself as a handsome human fellow. In other words, when I was invited to write about shapeshifters for *The Storyteller*, there was a wealth of inspiration to draw upon.

Unfortunately, that meant I brainstormed too many ideas for this comic! The initial list was a page long.

After a painful process of elimination, I chose two potential stories (their characters and action scenes were visually interesting, which is important for a comic) and sent them to my editor, asking, "What do you think?" She encouraged me to choose the story I was most excited about writing.

Ultimately, "The Dancers" won out, and I am so happy it did. The art and colors of Alexandra Fastovets and James Fenner breathe life into this story of change, loss, and resilience. That said, I've saved the idea list for future projects; the world can never have too many shapeshifters.

As a final note, here's the inspiration for "The Dancers":

Coyote was walking along a stream, when he came upon a patch of reeds. They became women and started to dance. Delighted, he joined them.

In one interpretation of the traditional Lipan story, the reeds are merely blown to and fro by the wind, and Coyote mistakes the unintentional movement for dancing. But other storytellers say that the reed people actually transformed into dancers, jumping and whirling with their new friend. Personally, I favor the latter version.

-Darcie Little Badger

FWOOSH

Oh!

FWOOSH

EVERY TIME THE WIND BLOWS, IT LOOKS LIKE THE PLANTS ARE DANCING!

FWOOSH

Hm. PERHAPS THEY ARE.

HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THE REED PEOPLE?

NO. WHO *ARE* THEY?

TO MOST, THE REED PEOPLE ARE JUST PLANTS SWAYING IN THE BREEZE...

BUT SOMETIMES, THEY REVEAL THEMSELVES AS...

DANCERS.

DON'T PLAY IN THE DIRT, ROSE!

OKAY, MOMMA!

MARY'S DAUGHTER HAD BEEN GIFTED WITH RHYTHM AND GRACE.

...AND BOUNDED OVER TUMBLEWEEDS.

ROSE DANCED TO THE BEAT OF HER IMAGINATION. SHE SPUN LIKE A WIND-SWEPT MAPLE SEED...

YET HER MOTHER WORRIED.

MANY ANCESTRAL DANCES HAVE BEEN LOST.

CLCK

IN PAST GENERATIONS, APACHE DANCERS HAD BEEN HUNTED AND PUNISHED FOR EXPRESSING THEIR CULTURE, THEIR JOY.

HOW COULD ROSE THRIVE IN THIS PERILOUS WORLD?

RUSTLE RUSTLE

Huh?

SKUNK!

PLEASE STAY BACK! I JUST HAD A BATH!

FWSH

Whew.

WHO'S THERE?

DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH US?

WOW! YES!

AT FIRST, ROSE DIDN'T QUESTION HER GOOD LUCK. FRIENDS HER AGE WERE RARE IN THE MIDDLE OF HILL COUNTRY.

WE SHOULD DANCE IN CROWNS. I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE ONE!

ARE WE NEIGHBORS? DO YOU LIVE NEARBY?

OUR HOME IS HERE, BY THE WATER.

REALLY? I'VE NEVER SEEN A HOUSE HERE.

THAT'S BECAUSE WE DON'T NEED ONE.

WELL, WHAT'S YOUR NAME? MINE'S ROSE.

I'M REED CHILD.

NICE! YOU'RE NAMED AFTER A PLANT, TOO! REEDS ARE PRETTY.

Heheh. THANK YOU.

DO YOU WANT TO DANCE MORE?

ALWAYS. MOMMA SAYS I'M A NATURAL.

SAY, HOW DO Y'ALL KNOW SO MANY SWELL MOVES?

MY FOLKS HAVE LIVED HERE FOREVER. WE'VE WITNESSED ALL KINDS OF DANCES.

OLD ONES, NEW ONES. BIG, IMPORTANT CEREMONIES AND TOTAL LARKS.

IS IT HARD TO LEARN ALL THAT?

YES AND NO. IT TAKES PRACTICE AND PERSEVERANCE.

I CAN MANAGE BOTH!

ROSE?
ROSE?

OVER HERE, MOMMA! I'M PLAYING WITH MY FRIENDS!

WHAT FRIENDS?

Huh? THEY WERE JUST HERE!

I GOT WORRIED. DON'T WANDER OUT OF SIGHT.

SORRY. THERE WAS A SKUNK, SO I RAN, AND THEN REED ASKED ME TO DANCE WITH ALL HER FRIENDS.

DON'T FIB, EITHER.

CROSS MY HEART, THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED!

WHY DIDN'T ROSE'S MOTHER SEE THE REED PEOPLE?

THEY HID FROM HER.

ROSE STAYED AWAKE ALL NIGHT THINKING OF HER NEW FRIENDS, WAITING FOR DAWN TO VISIT THEM AGAIN.

SHE DREADED THAT THEY WERE SIMPLY A VIVID DREAM.

IT'S ROSE!

HI ROSE!

I KNEW YOU WERE REAL!

LOOK AT MY SPECIAL DANCE MOVE.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

IT'S GREAT. DO IT AGAIN!

OVER THE YEARS, ROSE LEARNED MANY OTHER DANCE MOVES. AS A GIRL, SHE ONLY PERFORMED IN FRONT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

BUT AS A WOMAN, ROSE DANCED BEFORE **THOUSANDS.**

BRAVA!

BRAVA!

SHE'D ACHIEVED A LIFELONG GOAL. THAT MADE HER HAPPY, OF COURSE.

YET ROSE KEENLY MISSED HOME.

SHE YEARNED FOR THE DANCES OF HER YOUTH.

DID YOU HEAR? THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE HER ***PRINCIPAL DANCER.***

SURE I AM. GOODNIGHT, LADIES.

-:SIGH:-

SERIOUSLY? SHE'S ***GOOD,*** BUT IS ROSE REALLY ***PRIMA BALLERINA*** MATERIAL?

MOMMA! DID YOU MISS ME?

WE ALL DID. VICKI AND BOBBY ARE COMING FOR SUPPER.

I WANTED TO WATCH YOU DANCE YESTERDAY. BUT THE CITY'S SO FAR AWAY...

IT'S FINE. THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT TIME.

BEFORE THE OTHERS ARRIVE, I HAVE SOMETHING TO TAKE CARE OF.

KEEP THE TAMALES WARM. I'LL RETURN SOON!

HOW WAS THE FINAL SHOW?

WE GOT A STANDING OVATION.

THEY'LL MAKE ME PRINCIPAL DANCER NEXT YEAR.

WELL DESERVED!

IS IT? ARE YOU ***SURE?*** THERE'S SO MUCH PRESSURE. WHAT IF I--

I ***KNOW*** YOU, ROSE. SO YES, I'M SURE.

THANK YOU.

CAN YOU DANCE BALLET HERE? TEACH US SOME MOVES?

THERE'S TIME FOR A BRIEF SHOW.

THOUGH I DO HAVE ONE FAVOR TO ASK...

WHAT IS IT?

WHEN WE MET, YOU MENTIONED DANCES FROM THE PAST. MY PEOPLE HAVE LIVED HERE A LONG TIME, TOO. CAN YOU TEACH THE ***OLD DANCES*** TO ME?

OF COURSE!

FWOOSH

ROSE WAS TEN MINUTES LATE FOR DINNER, BUT HER MOTHER HAD KEPT THE TAMALES WARM.

MOMMA. I WANT TO SHARE SOMETHING WITH YOU.

Hm?

AN OLD DANCE. A DANCE OF OUR ANCESTORS.

LET'S GO OUTSIDE WHERE THERE'S MORE SPACE.

WHO SHARED THIS KNOWLEDGE?

I THOUGHT IT WAS LOST.

MY *MYSTERIOUS* FRIENDS ALONG THE CREEK.

XASTÉYÓ.

*INEVITABLY, SOME PRECIOUS THINGS--AND PEOPLE--**ARE** LOST IN THE CURRENT OF TIME.*

WHAT WILL WE DO WITH ALL HER STUFF, ROSE?

I'LL STORE EVERYTHING AFTER THE HOUSE IS GONE. DON'T WORRY.

THEY SOLD THE HOUSE?

THERE WAS NO CHOICE. WITH THEIR MOTHER GONE, THE SIBLINGS COULD NOT AFFORD IT.

STILL, ROSE HOPED THAT WOULD BE TEMPORARY.

I'LL BUY THIS PROPERTY BACK SOMEDAY, BOBBY.

UNTIL THEN, MY FRIENDS CAN WATCH OVER OUR HOME.

NO!

REED!

REED!

WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOU?

MA'AM! THIS IS AN ACTIVE WORK SITE.

WHEN DID YOU PLOW OVER EVERYTHING?

COUPLE MONTHS AGO. MA'AM, YOU NEED TO LEAVE.

I'M SO SORRY, MY FRIENDS.

WHY DID THEY TEAR DOWN ALL THE REEDS?

IN ROSE'S LIFETIME--AND THE LIFETIMES OF HER MOTHER, GREAT-GRANDMOTHER, AND GREAT-GREAT GRANDMOTHER--HER HOMELAND WAS STOLEN AND STRIPPED OF LIFE. EVEN NOW, HER PEOPLE STRUGGLE.

THAT'S TERRIBLE.

YES... BUT THEY SURVIVE.

BY TEACHING BALLET, ROSE EVENTUALLY SAVED ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY AN ACRE OF LAND. AFTER MANY DECADES, SHE GAVE IT TO HER NEPHEW.

HOWEVER, ROSE COULD NOT REMAIN AT HOME. AS HER HEALTH DECLINED, SHE WAS MOVED TO A FACILITY FOR ELDERS WHO HAVE NO BETTER OPTIONS.

IT'S TIME FOR BED, ROSE.

SWEET DREAMS.

THEY OFTEN ARE.

CLICK

ONLY YOU—INSTI AL

MY DANG KNEE.

Rose?

Rose?

ROSE!

WE'RE WAITING FOR YOU, ROSE.

DEAR FRIEND. I'M SO TIRED.

LEAN ON ME.

SHHISH

I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONE FOREVER. THEY DESTROYED THE OLD CREEK!

WE ESCAPED. IT WASN'T EASY, BUT OUR NEW PLACE IS BEAUTIFUL. YOU'LL SEE.

WELCOME HOME, ROSE.

Oh, MY FRIENDS! MY FRIENDS!

IS THIS MY HOME NOW?

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN.

ROSE AND THE REED PEOPLE CELEBRATED TOGETHER, EXPRESSING DANCES NEW AND OLD, UNFORGOTTEN AND TIMELESS.

PERHAPS, ALONG A GLITTERING LAKE IN HILL COUNTRY, THEY'RE STILL DANCING.

SWISHHH

I WISH I COULD DANCE, TOO.

YOU CAN!

ANYONE CAN DANCE IN THEIR OWN WAY.

AND SING. AROOOO!

THE END.

TALE THREE VARIANT COVER

Mateus Manhanini

Come and Sleep

This project was the perfect excuse for me to crack open the family bookcase and find all the collections of Japanese fairy tales I read as a child. Shapeshifting is a common theme in many of them, involving foxes, raccoons, and all manner of gods and magical creatures. Anyone familiar with my art knows that shapeshifting and transformation is a huge element in my work, and something I continually come back to in story concepts and ideas. Flipping through book after book of fairy tales made me realize how much I may have been influenced by these older tales!

I was drawn to the original "Come and Sleep" tale because of the mix of sadness and sweetness, and the real-life warmth of the characters' relationships. It is also an unusual story in that it is centered on love and acceptance rather than revenge or shenanigans, which are the usual drivers in Japanese shapeshifting tales.

The wild places of Japan are very dear to my heart, and simple rural life is my main experience living there, so I decided to base the story in a mountain village. I found myself digging deeper and deeper into the particulars of historical accuracy — would farmers in my chosen area of Japan have had access to indigo dye? Which style of hook would hang a pot over the open hearth of a poor household? In a stroke of luck, I found a book on traditional Japanese farmhouses in the library and hunched over it for days, making notes on styles of thatching, differences in roof heights and angles, depending on the regional climate...

It was great fun and also wildly unnecessary for the simple, character-driven story I wished to tell! Nonetheless, it was a wonderful window into my culture and left me excited to fan the little flame of curiosity that this project kindled.

-Emilia Cilento

Aahhh! HOT MOCHI IS THE PERFECT TREAT FOR THIS WEATHER!

IT'S A RICE CAKE, WITH SEAWEED AND SOY SAUCE. TRY IT!

DO WE ONLY GET TWO EACH?

I'M AFRAID SO.

WOOF! THERE'S A--***RUFF!***--A-A--THERE'S A FOX OVER THERE! NEAR THE EDGE OF THE WOODS!

:SIGH:

I'VE HEARD THE FOXES AROUND HERE ARE POWERFUL... DANGEROUS...

SEE ITS EYES GLOWING? IT'S A BAD OMEN!

I HOPE IT DOESN'T COME CLOSER...

SHALL I CHASE IT AWAY?

MY DEAR OLD BOY, THAT'S NO WAY TO TREAT A STRANGER! WHO KNOWS WHAT GOES ON IN THE FOX'S WORLD?

WHO KNOWS WHAT SWEETNESS, SADNESS, AND JOY SHE HAS IN HER LIFE?

I DON'T REALLY WANT TO FIND OUT!

COME INSIDE, I'LL TELL YOU A TALE THAT JUST MIGHT CHANGE YOUR MIND...

Hmph!

NOW...

A LONG TIME AGO, IN A VALLEY QUITE LIKE THIS ONE, THERE LIVED A YOUNG MAN.

HE SPENT EVERY DAY WORKING IN THE FIELDS WITH HIS FATHER AND BROTHERS.

ONE SPRING EVENING, HE TOOK THE LONG WAY HOME BESIDE THE RIVER, AS HE OFTEN DID WHEN HE WISHED TO BE ALONE WITH HIS THOUGHTS.

I THOUGHT THIS WAS MY SECRET PLACE, BUT IT SEEMS YOU ENJOY IT AS WELL. YOU'VE BEEN HERE ALMOST EVERY NIGHT THIS WEEK.

I-I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO DISTURB YOU! I'LL GO HOME, PLEASE EXCUSE ME--

HAHA!

BE SURE TO COME AGAIN TOMORROW!

THIS IS UNBEARABLY ROMANTIC. THERE AREN'T EVEN ANY FIREFLIES IN SPRINGTIME!

PERHAPS NOT. BUT DON'T INTERRUPT!

HE DID RETURN THE NEXT EVENING...

AND THE NEXT...

AND THE NEXT.

EVERY DAY...

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

AND EVERY NIGHT.

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

THEIR HEARTS GREW CLOSER.

THERE CAME A TIME WHEN THE LOVERS REALIZED, AS LOVERS HAVE SINCE THE DAWN OF THE WORLD, THAT THEY COULD NOT BEAR TO BE WITHOUT EACH OTHER.

LUCKILY THERE'S A HANDY FIX FOR THIS PROBLEM.

:SIGH: A WEDDING.

PRECISELY!

KUFF

KUFF

RUFF

RUFF

RUFF

RUFF

KUFF

KUFF

SHOO!

WHAT A RACKET!

KUFF

AKOOOOO

THE MAN'S FAMILY HAD DOUBTS, CERTAINLY...

NONE OF HER FAMILY CAME! NOT EVEN HER PARENTS! MAYBE WE'VE MADE A MISTAKE... DEAR?

Hmm.

IT'S BAD LUCK TO HAVE ALL THE DOGS MAKING SUCH A FUSS.

HE SHOULD HAVE MARRIED ONE OF THE GIRLS FROM THIS VILLAGE, NOT SOME STRANGER HE MET AT THE RIVER...

...BUT BY THE END OF THE EVENING, ALL AGREED THAT THE BRIDE, THOUGH MYSTERIOUS, WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND CHARMING THEY HAD EVER SEEN.

I'M GOING TO THE RIVER TOMORROW TO FIND MY OWN WIFE!

THEY FIXED UP THE COTTAGE BESIDE HIS FAMILY HOME, AND TOOK GREAT PLEASURE IN SETTLING INTO THEIR LIFE TOGETHER.

ONE THING DISTURBED THEIR PEACE, HOWEVER... USUALLY GENTLE AND PLACID, THE FAMILY DOG'S HATRED OF THE BRIDE SEEMED ONLY TO GROW AS TIME PASSED.

UP UNTIL THIS POINT, HE HAD BEEN RESTRAINED WHENEVER SHE WAS NEARBY...

BUT OLD ROPE DOES NOT LAST FOREVER...

AND EVERY DOG MUST HAVE ITS DAY.

SSH—TING!

SSNAKK

A-ha, A FOX IN DISGUISE! GOOD OLD DOG, I'D HAVE CHASED HER AWAY TOO!

Oh, INDEED?

THE YOUNG MAN HOPED EVERY DAY AND EVERY NIGHT THAT HIS WIFE WOULD COME BACK.

YOU CAN IMAGINE HIS MISERY--THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE, AND SOON-TO-BE MOTHER OF HIS CHILD...VANISHED!

MY DEAR! IS THAT YOU?

MY LOVE!

HE NEVER SPOKE OF IT TO ANYONE, BUT HE KNEW IN HIS HEART THAT HER TRUE FORM DID NOT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO THE LOVE HE BORE HER.

WE KNEW SOMETHING WAS FISHY ABOUT HER.

GOOD RIDDANCE, I SAY! CAN'T TRUST A FOREST SPIRIT...

NEVER MIND, SON, YOU WILL FORGET ABOUT HER IN NO TIME.

SHE TURNED OUT TO BE QUITE WRONG.

Oh MY!

HE COULD NOT BE PERSUADED TO GIVE THE CHILD AWAY, OR TO REMARRY.

THINKING ALWAYS OF HIS WIFE, HE RAISED THEIR DAUGHTER TO BE KIND TO EVERY PERSON AND EVERY CREATURE, NO MATTER THEIR APPEARANCE OR REPUTATION.

PRETTY!

DON'T BE SCARED! SEE WHAT A BEAUTIFUL WEB SHE IS BUILDING! ISN'T IT PRETTY?

Aah, NOW WHAT OF THE FOX? THOUGH SHE DARED NOT SHOW HERSELF, SHE HAD NOT ABANDONED HER FAMILY...

AND A CREATURE AS CLEVER AND POWERFUL AS SHE FOUND MANY WAYS TO BE CLOSE TO THEM WITHOUT BEING NOTICED.

?!?

...THIS TREE HAS NEVER BEEN HERE BEFORE, I'M SURE OF IT.

IT'S NOT EVEN THE SEASON FOR MAGNOLIA BLOSSOMS.

NIGHTS, DAYS, YEARS PASSED.

A KITE FOR YOU, DEAR!

THERE YOU ARE! I GOT--

TIME FLEW EVER ONWARDS...

Oh, FATHER, LOOK!

Ah!

EVENTUALLY, AS THEY ALWAYS DO, THE YOUNG MAN BECAME AN OLD ONE.

ONE SPRING EVENING, HE WENT WALKING ALONG THE RIVER, WHERE HE HAD NOT BEEN IN MANY YEARS.

YES, THIS WAS THE SPOT. ALMOST A LIFETIME AGO NOW...

GRRAAO

TSUNGG

YOU...

WAIT! DON'T GO!

PLEASE...

WOULD YOU...COME BACK TO THE HOUSE WITH ME?

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING, YOU... I'LL MAKE YOUR FAVORITE TEA...

PLEASE.

MY DEAREST LOVE...

PLEASE DO NOT BE AFRAID.

COME IN AND SLEEP.

YOU MUST KNOW HOW LONG I HAVE LOVED YOU, AND HOW MUCH... IT HAS BEEN A LONG DAY, AND A VERY LONG LIFE WITHOUT YOU IN IT.

DELIGHTFULLY, THE WORDS "*COME AND SLEEP*" TRANSLATE TO "*KITSUNE*" IN JAPANESE.

AND KITSUNE IS THE WORD FOR ***FOX!***

...SHE WAITED ALL THOSE YEARS TO GO BACK TO HER FAMILY?

WELL, YES. SHE WAS AFRAID THAT THEY WOULD NOT WELCOME OR LOVE HER, BEING WHAT SHE IS.

BUT SHE HAD A GOOD HEART! SURELY ANYONE WOULD HAVE ACCEPTED HER IF THEY KNEW...

...

Oh.

SPEAKING OF SLEEP, MY OLD FRIEND...I THINK IT'S TIME FOR BED! WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?

YES, YES...

IN A MINUTE! MAYBE OUR FOX IS HUNGRY!

END

TALE FOUR VARIANT COVER

Mateus Manhanini

Ole Heg

One of my favorite features of the *Storyteller* series is the ability to explore tales from a vast collection of cultures and ethnicities. The stories reveal the beauty and uniqueness of the world's inhabitants and, at the same time, show how connected we are. With that in mind, I went down a rabbit hole in researching shapeshifter folklore, discovering the similarities between people who are oceans apart. But what struck me most was finding the shared stories within a specific region like the Caribbean, and seeing how diverse the mythologies were within West Indian culture.

That was how I discovered my story. I was familiar with transformation stories surrounding well-known creatures like vampires and werewolves, but being Belizean-American, I wanted to invite readers to learn about West Indian shapeshifters. After a bit of digging, I soon discovered the soucouyant. The vampiric, skin-shedding character appears in Trinidadian and St. Lucian lore and shows up in Haiti as the *Loogaroo*. You cannot imagine how thrilled I was when I found out that Belize had its own version of the soucouyant, known as *Ole Heg*.

Immediately, I pieced together how I wanted to build the character. I already had a foundation for Ole Heg's basic abilities, but I had to develop her personality. Heg was a monster in her fireball form, but she could be just as wicked in human form with her taunting nature. I started to picture this Rumpelstiltskin-type of character — impish and haughty — complete with her own nursery rhyme. She just needed an equally compelling foe.

The Ole Heg wives' tale exists to scare children into coming inside before dark. So, naturally, I chose a child to thwart the evil creature's plans. She would go on this sort of hero's journey, discovering the strength within herself to overcome feelings of helplessness and fear.

With so many shared mythologies surrounding the soucouyant, I was deliberate about putting the fingerprint of Belizean culture on this story. Belize is so rich and distinct in its language, cuisine, arts, and practices that I wanted to capture as much of it as possible within this short story. I am hopeful that I could even do my family's country the slightest bit of justice in bringing the story of Ole Heg to life.

-Deron Bennett

GRRRR!

WROOF! WROOF!

Hnnh?

JUST WHAT HAS *GOTTEN* INTO YOU, MY BOY?!

THERE'S A *STRANGE FLICKER* MOVING OUTSIDE!

WHAT IF IT'S A *GHOST?!*

SKRTCH SKRTCH

Oho, MY BOY! YOU'VE BEEN HAD.

'TIS BUT A SMALL TIN REFLECTING THE MOONLIGHT'S GLOW.

YOU SEE?

BUT THIS *DOES* REMIND ME OF A CAUTIONARY TALE--A *BELIZEAN* STORY ABOUT HOW DANGEROUS IT IS TO WANDER OUTSIDE AT NIGHT.

Grnnn. *Of course,* there's a story.

LEGEND HAS IT THAT THERE IS A *SHAPESHIFTING OLD WOMAN* WHO TRANSFORMS INTO A BLOODSUCKING CREATURE OF *FLAME...*

...THE SOUCOUYANT KNOWN AS *OLE HEG.*

LONG AGO, THERE WAS A YOUNG CREOLE GIRL BY THE NAME OF **RUTHIE** WHO LIVED IN A SMALL VILLAGE WITH HER MOTHER.

ONE DAY, WHILE SHE AND HER MOTHER WERE VISITING THE MARKET, RUTHIE WAS STRUCK BY SOMEONE SINGING AN ODD LITTLE TUNE.

PICKNEY, PICKNEY OF THIS HERE TIME...ALL OF YOU HAVE IT GOOD AND FINE...

RUTHIE HAD BEEN TO THE MARKET PLENTY OF TIMES, BUT NEVER BEFORE HAD SHE LAID EYES ON **THIS** STRANGE WOMAN.

YOU RUN ABOUT AND PLAY AT NIGHT...SOMETIMES AS LATE AS EIGHT AND NINE.

AND STRANGE SHE WAS. SHE WOULD DANCE AND SING A LITTLE DITTY AS SHE WORKED...

WHEN I WAS SMALL AND BRAVE AND STOU--

...BUT IF **ANY** RICE SPILLED FROM HER MORTAR...

...SHE WOULD **FLY TO THE GROUND** AND PICK IT UP **GRAIN** BY TINY **GRAIN.**

...THERE WAS NEVER A NIGHT YOU COULD SEE ME OUT.

ESPECIALLY WHEN I HEAR THEM SAY...

...OLE HEG, OLE HEG--**COME OUT AND PLAY!**

WHEN THE OLD WOMAN CAUGHT HER EYE, RUTHIE WAS OVERCOME BY A FEAR SHE COULD NOT EXPLAIN.

THERE YOU ARE! YOU READY TO GO?

MOMMY... DID YOU NOTICE THE NEW RICE LADY?

THAT WOMAN WHO SING 'BOUT OLE HEG? HARD TO MISS, SHE.

MOMMY... WHO IS OLE HEG?

GRANNY USED TO TELL ME 'BOUT THIS SCARY OLD WOMAN...

...WHO WOULD ALWAYS ACT ***WICKED*** TO THE PEOPLE OF THE VILLAGE.

THEN WHEN NIGHT COME...SHE WOULD ***TAKE OFF HER SKIN*** AND TURN INTO ***PURE FLAME.***

SHE WOULD ROAM 'BOUT THE YARD, ***WAITING*** FOR SOMEONE TO OPEN THE DOOR.

AND WHEN YOU ***FINALLY*** OPEN THE DOOR, SHE WOULD ***DASH INSIDE*** AND ***SUCK YOUR BLOOD!***

I THOUGHT GRANNY WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO KNEW THAT STORY!

-:YAAWN:- Oh MAN. TIME TO SLEEP. MAKE SURE YOU WASH UP GOOD AND GET STRAIGHT TO BED.

YES, MOMMY.

JUST AS RUTHIE WAS WASHING HER HANDS, SHE HEARD A FAINT VOICE FROM OUTSIDE.

WHEN I WAS SMALL AND BRAVE AND STOUT...

CHK

I-IS SOMEONE THERE?

...THERE WAS NEVER A NIGHT YOU COULD SEE ME OUT!

FWAM

PHEW! I ALMOST THOUGHT RUTHIE WAS GOING TO BE GOBBLED UP BY THAT SCARY OLD GHOST.

I'M GLAD SHE'S SAFE NOW.

WELL...NOT *PRECISELY,* MY FRIEND.

Huh? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

RUTHIE'S MOTHER ONLY KNEW ***PART*** OF THE LEGEND.

WHILE IT WAS CERTAINLY TRUE THAT OLE HEG COULD NOT ENTER THE HOME WITHOUT SOMEONE ***FIRST*** OPENING THE DOOR FOR HER...

...WHAT SHE ***DIDN'T*** SUSPECT WAS THAT ONCE THE DOOR WAS OPENED FOR OLE HEG...

...IT WAS A ***PERMANENT*** INVITATION.

EVEN WITH THE DOOR LOCKED?!

EVEN WITH THE DOOR LOCKED! YOU SEE... SOUCOUYANTS ARE A CLEVER SORT.

THEY CAN ENTER THROUGH EVEN THE TINIEST OF OPENINGS. THEY MAY EVEN COME THROUGH THE CRACKS IN THE WALLS!

Oh... POOR RUTHIE!

YES...POOR RUTHIE. NOW OLE HEG COULD WANDER INTO HER HOME **ANY TIME** SHE WISHED.

AND THAT VERY NIGHT, SHE SLIPPED IN THROUGH THE WALLS...

...PAST A TERROR-STRICKEN RUTHIE, HUDDLED IN HER BED...

...AND INTO RUTHIE'S MOTHER'S BEDROOM, WHERE SHE WAS FAST ASLEEP.

YOU'VE BEEN QUIET ALL MORNING. SOMETHING WRONG, BABY?

I-I SEEN THE FIRE LADY! LAST NIGHT, I SEEN ***OLE HEG!*** AND I THINK SHE CAME INSIDE AND--

Heh! YOU MUST HAVE HAD ONE ***CRAZY*** DREAM, GAL!

BUT IT ***WASN'T*** A DREAM. SHE WAS RIGHT THERE! IN THE YARD, LIKE YOU SAID.

Oh LORD! I ***NEVER*** SHOULD HAVE TOLD YOU THAT STORY.

GRANNY'S OLD TALES USED TO FRIGHTEN ME, TOO.

BUT SHE ***WAS*** HERE, MOMMY. LOOK! SHE EVEN LEFT MARKS ON YOU!

Chuh. I MUST HAVE SLEPT WRONG. THAT BED HARD, FOR TRUE.

HEY, WE NEED SOME PLANTAIN FOR DINNER.

WHY DON'T YOU BE A BRAVE GAL AND GO TO THE MARKET FOR ME?

MAYBE YOU'LL FIND THE RICE LADY THERE AND SEE SHE'S NO OLE HEG.

SO RUTHIE WENT INTO THE MARKET, CAREFULLY AVOIDING THE OLD WOMAN AND HER MORTAR.

BUT OLE HEG WOULD **NOT** BE IGNORED.

Ooooh, GAL! SOMETHING SMELL GOOOOD!

THAT PLANTAIN FOR ME?

IT MIGHT GO NICE WITH DINNER.

YOU KNOW, I HAD A ***GOOD*** MEAL LAST EVENING. ***TASTY.***

IT WAS SWEET, AND JUICY, AND ***HEALTHY!*** MAKE ME FEEL YOUNG AGAIN!

I MIGHT JUST HAVE ***SECONDS*** TONIGHT!

HOPE I SEE YOU AGAIN SOON! ***HA!***

YOU OKAY?

NOW THAT YOU SEE THE OLD WOMAN IN THE DAY, SHE'S NOT SO SCARY, TRUE?

I SUPPOSE. BUT... IF IT'S OKAY... MAYBE I COULD SLEEP WITH YOU?

JUST FOR TONIGHT?

COME ON, GAL. ONE NIGHT WON'T HURT.

THANK YOU, MOMMY!

GOODNIGHT, RUTHIE.

GOODNIGHT, MOMMY.

Small and brave and stout. Heh.

Oh NO! I FELL ASLEEP!

MORNING, RUTHIE. WHAT ARE YOU ON ABOUT NOW?

I-I TRIED TO STAY UP AND CATCH OLE HEG! SHE SAID SHE WOULD COME LAST NIGHT AND EAT US LIKE DINNER.

AYE YI YI. I TELL YOU...IT WAS *JUST A STORY.*

AND BESIDES... YOU DON'T LOOK *EATEN UP* TO ME.

BUT LOOK HOW YOU BRUISED UP!

I *KNOW* SHE WAS HERE, MOMMY. AND SHE GOT YOU ON THE ARM!

RUTHIE! STOP WITH THIS FOOLISHNESS NOW.

LIKE I ALREADY SAID, MY BED HARD AND I MUST HAVE JUST--

UNGH!

MOMMY!

I'M FINE. I'M ***FINE!*** LOOK HOW YOU WORK ME UP!

YOU WILL SLEEP IN YOUR ***OWN*** BED TONIGHT, CHILD. AND I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE 'BOUT OLE HEG.

NOW HURRY UP AND GET SOME BREAKFAST. WE NEED TO PICK SOME ***KINEP*** TO SELL TO THE FRUIT MAN.

THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH FOR TODAY.

BUT WE ONLY FILLED IT HALFWAY...

UNF MY MUSCLES ACHE BAD. MUST BE THAT SPILL I HAD THIS MORNING.

WHAT'S WRONG, CHILD? YOU NO GET ENOUGH SLEEP?

I DO THE *SAME* THING, YOU KNOW?

I BET NO ONE STAY UP LATER THAN ME! *Hee hee!*

MAYBE YOU SHOULD GO HELP MOMMY. SHE LOOKIN' A LITTLE TIRED TOO, NO?

REST UP, GAL! HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN SOON!

Heh.

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, RUTHIE WOULD TRY TO REMAIN VIGILANT.

BUT ALAS, SHE COULDN'T OUTLAST THE VIGOROUS DEMON.

EACH TIME RUTHIE WENT TO THE MARKET, OLE HEG WOULD BE THERE TO HECKLE THE POOR, LITTLE GIRL.

RUTHIE'S MOTHER WAS IN TERRIBLE DANGER. OLE HEG WAS DRAINING AND ABSORBING HER ENERGY AND SPIRIT...

...BECOMING YOUNGER AND YOUNGER WITH EACH ATTACK.

:KOFF: THAT OLD LADY MUST BE SICK LIKE ME.

LOOK! SHE HAVE HER :KOFF: DAUGHTER MINDING THE RICE TODAY.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO THE GIRL'S MOTHER? WILL SHE BE OKAY?

I WAS JUST GETTING TO THAT!

EVENTUALLY, THE ATTACKS TOOK THEIR TOLL, AND RUTHIE'S MOTHER BECAME BED-RIDDEN AND FEVERISH.

SHE CALLED IN A MEDICINE WOMAN TO FIGURE OUT THE SOURCE OF HER AILMENT...

...BUT, OF COURSE, THE DOCTOR COULDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS **TRULY** WRONG.

I TELL YOU THE TRUTH. THIS NO LOOK GOOD. WE WILL DO WHAT WE CAN, BUT--

NO! THIS IS THAT **WITCH** OLE HEG'S DOING! SHE KEEP DRAINING MOMMY AND NOBODY BELIEVES ME!

BUT SHE CAN'T TAKE MOMMY. I **WON'T LET HER!**

RUTHIE!

:HACK: :KOFF:

...I won't let her.

AND SO, RUTHIE WAITED UNTIL NIGHTFALL AND SNUCK OFF INTO THE MARKETPLACE, HOPING TO STOP THE OLD WITCH.

OOOOH... SUCH LOVELY NECTAR YOU BRING TO ME EACH NIGHT, MY SWEET HEG. I CAN TASTE IT ALREADY.

Ah ah ah... REMEMBER, BAZIL--

YOU AND ME HAVE A DEAL.

COME NOW. LET US MAKE THE TRADE.

YES, CHILD. BLOOD FOR BLOOD. SOUL FOR SOUL.

:GASP:

WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! THE CURSE!

I ALMOST FEEL SORRY FOR YOU. FORCED TO PICK UP RICE IN SUCH A FOOLISH WAY.

IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL, THAT HEX WILL BE THE ***RUIN*** OF YOU.

:Tchh: I'M TOO SMART FOR THESE HUMANS. NOBODY EVER THINKS TO PUT ***SALT*** ON MY SKINNY-SKIN AND MAKE IT STOP FIT ME.

...AND IF THEY DO?

WELL THEN, THE SUN GONNA TAKE ME AWAY.

BUT, NO WORRY. MY SKINNY IS ***WELL-HIDDEN*** IN THE MORTAR.

THAT'S THE ***LAST*** PLACE ANYONE--

KRK

THE CHILD!

PICKNEY, PICKNEY! YOU COME TO PLAY WITH OLE HEG?!

NOOO!

HOW *DARE* YOU?!

YOU THINK YOU CAN OUTSMART *ME?*

JUST YOU WAIT TILL I'M DONE HERE!

THERE WILL BE NOTHING LEFT OF YOU BUT SKIN AND--

NO, HEG! THIS TIME, THERE WILL BE NOTHING LEFT OF *YOU!*

YOU *BRAT!*

I WILL GET YOU *AND YOUR PRECIOUS MOMMY!*

THAT'S THE LAST OF IT. AND *JUST* IN TIME!

THAT GAL WILL PAY FOR--

AIIIEEE!

SKINNY-SKIN, YOU NO KNOW ME?

PLEASE NOT NOW, MY SKINNY-SKIN! ***NOT NOW!***

BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. OLE HEG WAS CAUGHT BY THE SUN... NEVER TO BE SEEN AGAIN.

AAHHHHHHHHHHH

BUT...WHAT ABOUT RUTHIE? AND HER MOM?

WELL...BRAVE LITTLE RUTHIE DID INDEED SAVE HER MOTHER'S LIFE.

THE NEXT MORNING, SHE WAS BACK TO HER OLD SELF-- ALIVE AND WELL.

HER MOTHER NEVER DID ***QUITE*** BELIEVE THAT THE OLE HEG HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH HER SICKNESS...

...BUT RUTHIE TOLD HER ADVENTURE TO EVERYONE WHO WOULD LISTEN, JUST THE SAME.

AND LIKE ANY TRULY GOOD TALE, RUTHIE'S STORY SPREAD FAR AND WIDE, REACHING THE FURTHEST CORNERS OF THE GLOBE.

AND BECAUSE OF RUTHIE, CHILDREN OF THE WORLD...

...and old chroniclers like myself...

...KNOW TO BE CAUTIOUS OF OPENING THEIR DOORS TO STRANGE THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT...

...FOR YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN OLE HEG MIGHT ***RETURN!***

THE END.

THE MAKING OF

Jim Henson's™ THE STORYTELLER™

Shapeshifters

A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE ART AND CRAFT OF THE STORYTELLERS AND THEIR TALES.

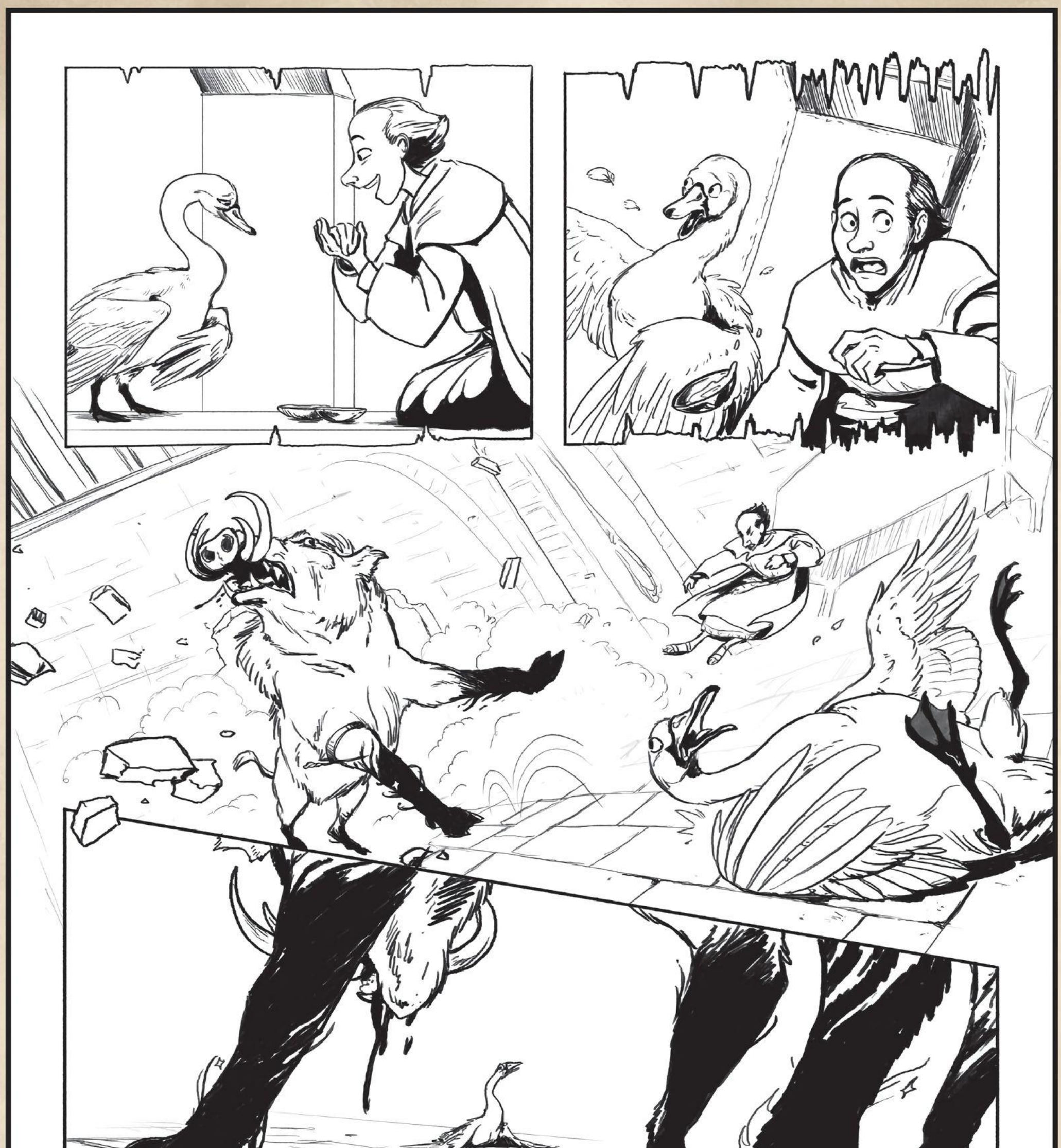
With Art and Commentary by

Nori Retherford Alexandra Fastovets

Emilia Cilento Dani Pendergast

Tale One Art by Nori Retherford

Nori Retherford Commentary: Even though comic pages are still-images, with each panel showing a moment in time, I think it's helpful to use animation principles to indicate what actions came just before, and to anticipate what's about to happen. Here, I staged the children running along a similar path, so they almost "animate" when your eye scans across, and they pull you into the panel. I try to do this any time there's a group shot. Directional lines in the grass and shrubbery, and billowing cloaks and hair were also useful throughout!



Tale One Art by Nori Retherford

NR: Andre [Frattino]'s script indicated a building rumble SFX, so I thought it'd be neat to highlight this visually in the panel borders. Panel 1 is very serenely staged, with just a few jolts in the border, but these grow into a dramatic seismograph effect in panel 2, as everything falls off-kilter, and erupts in panel 3 when all the characters and scenery are flung at the reader.

Tale Two Art by Alexandra Fastovets

Alexandra Fastovets Commentary: At first glance, this is a calm moment of transition to another stage in the character's life, where, in fact, a feeling of sadness gradually comes. Diagonal horizon lines accentuate the discomfort of this seemingly cozy room.

Tale Two Art by Alexandra Fastovets

AF: When I drew this page, I felt genuine sadness. The framing of the panels create the feeling of a small room, dark, in which there is not much light . . . but the lamp provides a flicker of hope.

Tale Three Art by Emilia Cilento

Emilia Cilento Commentary: This was the climactic page that the whole story had been building up to. I'd known from the start that I wanted an explosive first panel with the little fox jumping from shock and trying to defend herself, and her kimono falling aside. I wanted it to feel like the whole thing— from her first being revealed to using her "foxfire" to escape the dogs— took place in only a few seconds. The trio of panels at the bottom were great fun; I used speed-lines and angle changes to convey that the dogs are rapidly closing in and almost on top of her before she saves herself.

Tale Three Art by Emilia Cilento

EC: This page was very important to me, particularly the gaze of the fox in the first panel. She is walking into the arms of a loved one for the first time after many years of solitude and longing. I tried to catch that hesitant and tender feeling in her eyes. My aim with the whole page was to draw a gentle, old woman version of a "magical girl" transformation, with a focus on expression and the hands in panel 5. I wanted his hands on her cheeks to look soft and real. A little sparkle never hurt anyone, either.

Tale Four Art by Dani Pendergast

Dani Pendergast Commentary: When thumbnailing my pages, I always think of how adding color will enhance the mood and affect the composition of the page. Having a fiery creature emitting a glow was fun to work with. I could use that to my advantage when separating my foregrounds and backgrounds, as in this sequence. I also had a lot of fun with this page because this is the first time we see Ole Heg in her fiery form. I wanted her to look like she could contort her body in unnatural ways to give off an uncanny valley vibe. A fun fact about me is that I have spindly-long witch fingers, which usually work against me when I have to draw hands, but they were a great reference for Ole Heg's character.

Tale Four Art by Dani Pendergast

DP: The chase scene! This page was really fun to thumbnail and ink—I'm such a sucker for some good foliage. I also made a small change as I brought it to final. In the third panel, I initially had Ruthie running towards the foreground, which felt a little lacking. Having her look over her shoulder gave it a more frantic feel, giving me the opportunity to add a red glow in the foreground of the panel as Ole Heg closes in on her (page 95). I also imagined that hunting Ruthie down might've been a bit amusing at first for Ole Heg, but as they get closer to the mortar and pestle, she grows more desperate and enraged.

TALE FOUR COVER

Christian Ward

TALE ONE COVER

Mike del Mundo

TALE TWO COVER

Qistina Khalidah

the STORYTELLERS

Andre R. Frattino is an award-winning American graphic novelist from Gainesville, Florida, currently residing in the coastal region of Savannah, Georgia. While his penchant is for writing and/or illustrating historically-inspired comics, Andre's narrative roots are deeply sown into the grounds of folklore and legend, and he enjoys mixing the two together in a variety of his published works. Outside of comics, Andre moonlights as a ghost tour guide in Savannah, a role he has proudly held for 17 years and counting.

Nori Retherford is an American illustrator and story artist living with her cat and houseplants just outside Seattle, Washington. As a child, she wanted to grow up to be a bat, or a tiger, or a wolf, and a love of animals and strange creatures has defined her work ever since. You can find her on social media and at NoriRetherford.com, or lurking around the Castle of the (Dark) Crystal.

Kieran Quigley is a freelance colorist and illustrator from the UK, living in Austin, TX. He spends most of his time inside hiding from the weather, where he can usually be spotted playing video games. When he isn't, he likes to work on sci-fi, fantasy, and anime illustrations, and comics that promote representation.

Darcie Little Badger is a Lipan Apache storyteller with a PhD in oceanography. In her free time, she enjoys talking about plankton and watching scary found footage movies. Her favorite marine organism is all of them, and if she could shapeshift into one type of animal (with the ability to become human again), she'd choose the turkey vulture. Darcie has published two award-winning young adult fantasy novels, *Elatsoe* and *A Snake Falls to Earth*, and is married to a veterinarian named Taran.

Alexandra Fastovets lives in Ukraine. She can't stop eating sweets, loves metal music, and black and pink colors. She's done some work for Dark Horse and Disney (but that's still not enough!). She loves to study the shape of the human body in all its manifestations, and she constantly experiences love for opposite feelings — joy and sadness, gloom and cheerfulness. She likes to convey this most of all in her art.

James Fenner is an illustrator, animator, daydreamer, and storyteller originally from the shores of Lake Huron in Michigan, but now dwells in the misty forests of the Pacific Northwest with his husband. Driven by dreams, empathy, and mystery, he is always striving to convey emotion with graphic novels and animation. When not drawing, you can find him outside playing music by a creek.

Emilia Cilento (also known online as Em Niwa) is an Australian-Japanese artist, occasional tattooist, and aspiring roller skater living on the Sunshine Coast in Australia. She's got a few comic projects in the works that she doesn't want to tell anyone about, for fear that the added pressure will send her around the twist before they're done. She spends her time avoiding life admin, wishing she could draw animals better, and experimenting with new ways to eat tahini.

Deron Bennett is a Belizean-American writer from the part of New Jersey where they celebrate the Mets and eat pork roll, not Taylor Ham. His biggest dream is to make use of the collection of books, video games, and toys that collect dust on his shelves, because there is never enough time to enjoy them. The supernatural has always fascinated him, but he still keeps his doors and windows tightly shut just in case some spirit gets too chummy.

Dani Pendergast is an illustrator who grew up in Parkland, Florida, and then went on to get a BFA and MFA from the Illustration program at Syracuse University. Dani is the illustrator of *The Demon in the Wood*, a new graphic novel adaptation of a prequel novella by the author of *Shadow and Bone*, Leigh Bardugo. She aims to evoke a poetic and eerie quality to her work. Dani is based in Boston, Massachusetts, where she works from home with her three cats, Rosie, Disco, and Charles (the mean orange one).

Jim Campbell is a Ringo, Tripwire, and twice-Eisner-nominated letterer who lives and works in a small English market town that has a lovely pub at the end of his street. Mostly, he works from home and not in the pub. Mostly. You can find him on Twitter as @CampbellLetters and on Instagram as @jimcampbell, where he mostly posts pictures of extravagant barbecues he has cooked, and ludicrously ornate boots he has purchased.

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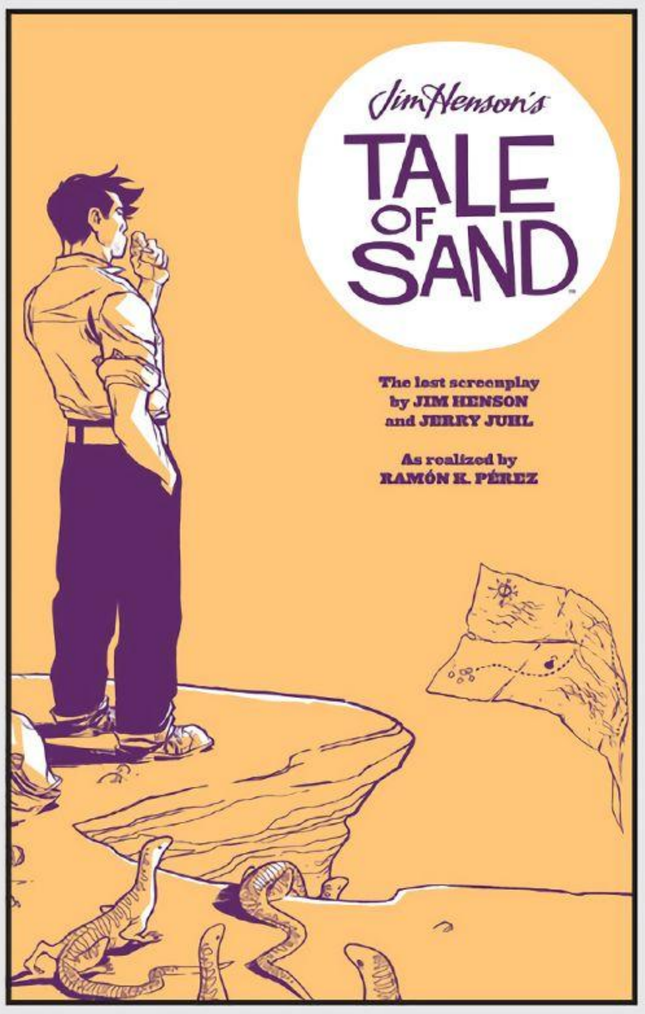

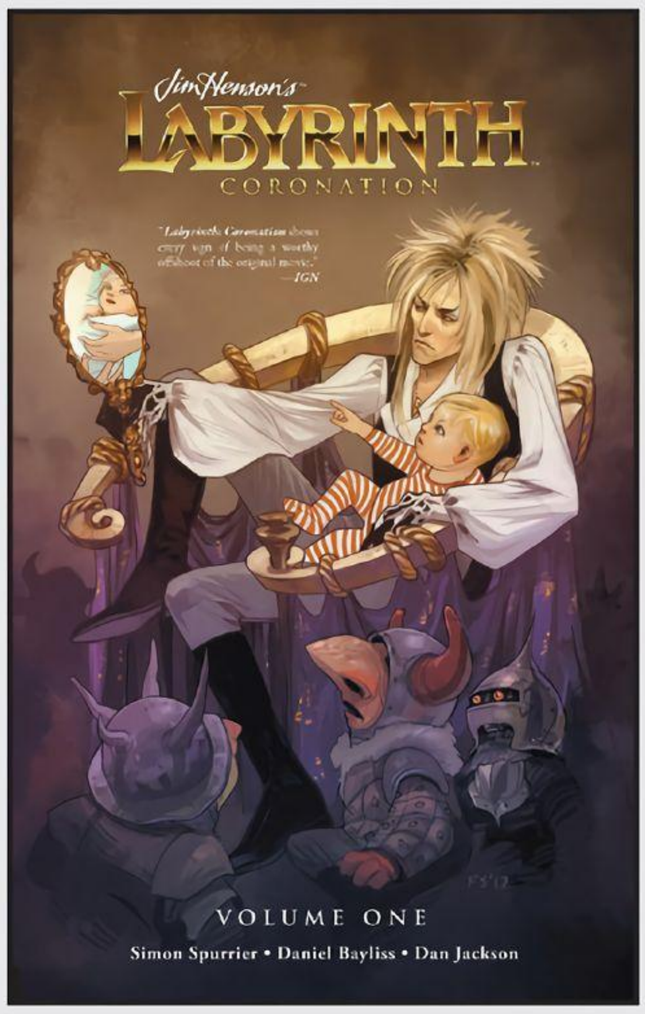

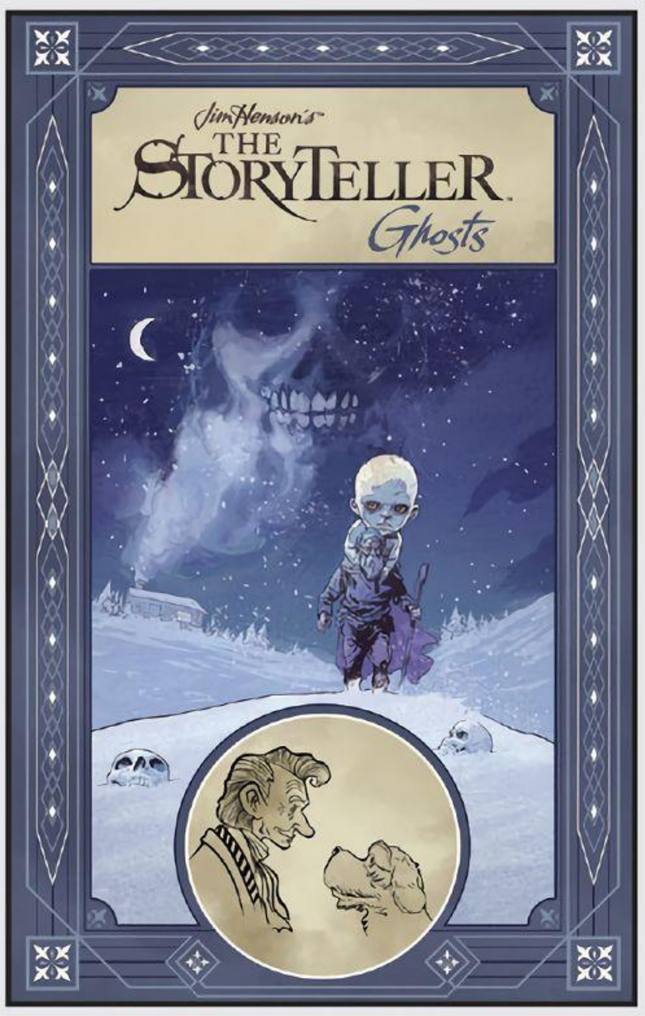

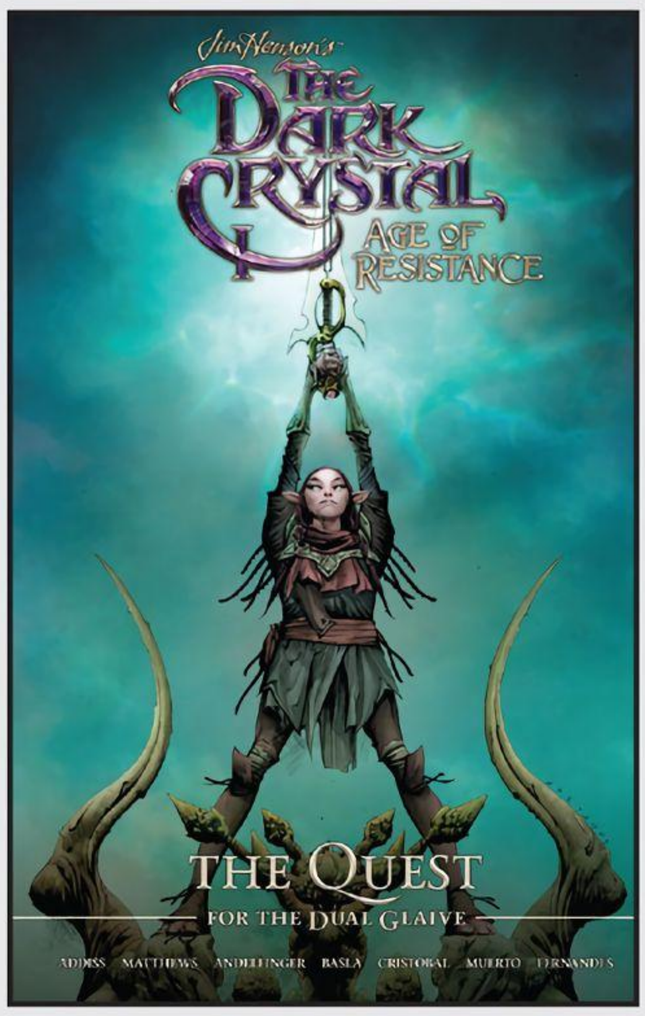

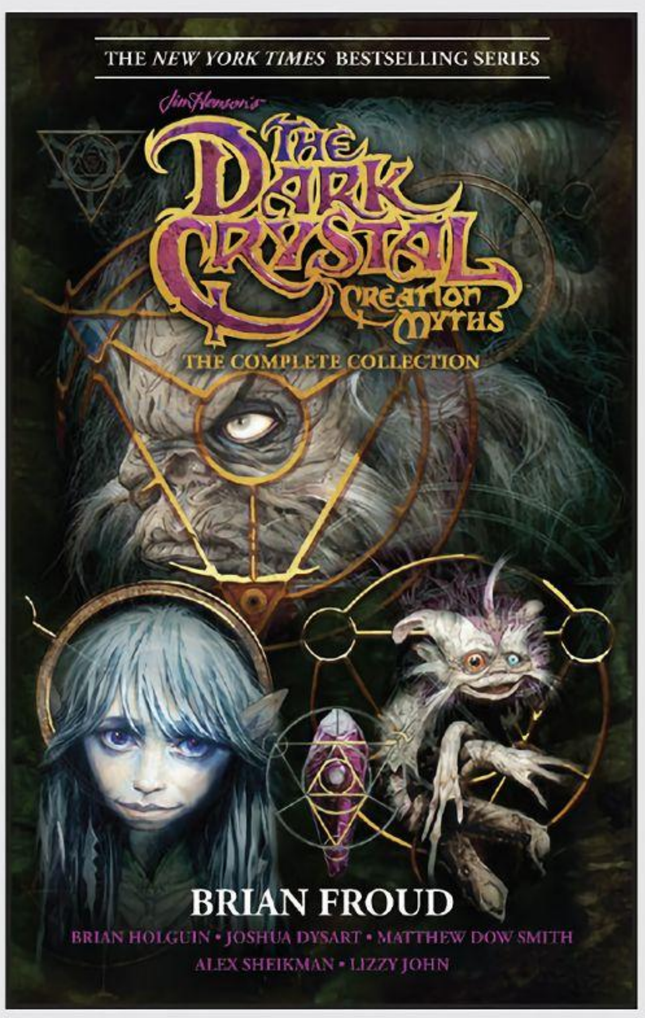

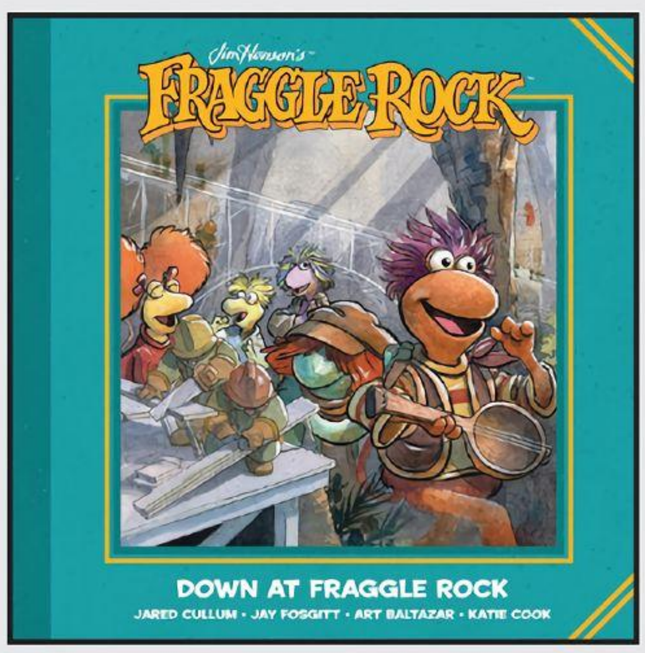

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